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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 001086

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: RCTV PROTESTS ENTER SECOND WEEK

REF: A. CARACAS 1082 AND PREVIOUS
[1](#)B. CARACAS 1068

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Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR DANIEL LAWTON FOR 1.4 (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Peaceful pro-RCTV protests continued into their second week. The students' medium term ability or desire to sustain the demonstrations remain unclear. Up to 10,000 students marched to the Supreme Court without incident June 4 and are planning to march to the National Assembly June 5. The government organized a June 2 mass rally in support of Chavez. In his fiery and shorter-than-usual speech to the crowd, Chavez threatened to eliminate the Catholic Church, the media, and educational institutions, if they continued trying to "undermine" his socialist revolution. Meanwhile, the Inter-American Human Rights Court may consider a petition for temporary protection for student leaders arrested the week of May 27. President Chavez continues to try to reframe the RCTV issue as an opposition effort to topple him, but his decision to close RCTV remains unpopular. End summary.

Chavistas Toy with Students

[1](#)2. (SBU) University student-led protests continued into their second week without incident and attracted a sizable crowd (Ref A). Pro-Chavez Mayor of the "Libertador" borough of Caracas Freddy Bernal granted permission for a June 4 march to the Supreme Court, then attempted to change the march route on June 3. After some negotiation, the students secured permission to stick to their original route. Up to 10,000 students participated in the march. Workers in buildings along the route came down from their offices to support the students. To underscore the peaceful nature of their protests, students handed roses to the Metropolitan Police units guarding the front of the Supreme Court.

Chavistas' Anti-Imperialism, Anti-RCTV March

[1](#)3. (SBU) The Chavista political machinery organized a mass rally June 2 for a march against imperialism and RCTV, although the crowd paled in comparison to those at the end of the December 2006 presidential election campaign. Posts estimates that there were between 100,000 and 200,000 participants, well below BRV claims of one million attendees. Using the themes, "Great anti-imperialist march," "Respect

Venezuela," and "Now Freedom of Expression Belongs to All," Chavez supporters gathered at two different locations in Caracas--Parque del Este in the pro-opposition Altamira area and La Bandera bus terminal--and marched toward Bolivar Avenue, where they were eventually addressed by President Chavez. Marchers included students from public and private universities, social missions, labor unions, and community councils. A considerable number of people were bused in from as far away as Bolivar, Anzoategui, Barinas, and Nueva Esparta states. Anecdotal reporting indicates some marchers were paid as much as 200,000 Bolivars, or USD 93 at the official rate.

¶4. (SBU) Prominent BRV officials in the crowd included Vice President Jorge Rodriguez, former VP Jose Vicente Rangel, Minister for Communication William Lara, Minister for High Education Luis Acuna, and Governors from Anzoategui, Guarico, Cojedes, and Miranda states, as well as Libertador Mayor Freddy Bernal, and Sucre Municipality Mayor and son of the former VP, Jose Vicente Rangel Avalos. A significant number of BRV employees also participated. According to one local press report, some Metropolitan Police officials at the march wore red shirts as part of their uniform.

¶5. (SBU) President Chavez delivered a fiery 90-minute speech to his red-shirted followers June 2 in front of a large banner emblazoned with the slogan "Freedom of Speech Now Pertains to Everyone." Chavez characterized ongoing demonstrations against his decision to close RCTV as the work of "oligarchs" and accused university student protesters of being misguided "lackeys of the empire." After a long explanation of Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci's ideas on "cultural hegemony," Chavez accused the Catholic Church, the media, and educational institutions of threatening the interests of his "socialist revolution." He warned that he would start eliminating these bastions of "bourgeois civil society," which he derided as retrograde and

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elitist, "one by one," if they continued to challenge his government. In a warning directed at opposition cable station Globovision, he specifically said he would consider pulling broadcasting licenses before the government concession period is over. Chavista supporters responded by chanting, "Now it's Globovision's turn."

Anti-RCTV Caravan

¶6. (SBU) On June 3, a pro-Chavez car caravan traveled throughout Caracas in response to Chavez' call to be on alert against any destabilization plan and prepare a "counter-attack." Chavista legislator and march coordinator Dario Vivas said the action was part of their plan to maintain a pro-Chavez "presence in the street." In Anzoategui state, Governor Tarek William Saab also headed a pro-Chavez march June 3. During his speech, Saab disqualified pro-RCTV student protesters as "destabilizers and coupsters," yet also reportedly called for compromise and peaceful coexistence.

RCTV Marches Continued

¶7. (SBU) Though much smaller than the BRV rally, opposition and civil society groups held a sizable and peaceful pro-RCTV march June 3. Protesters marched from the Chacao section of Caracas to the Human Rights Ombudsman's office, where they presented a document demanding respect for freedom of expression. Shouting "Pueblo, madura, este es dictadura," ("People, mature, this is a dictatorship") marchers also protested in support of opposition cable news station Globovision and the Church in response to Chavez' June 2 threats, as well as police mistreatment of student

protesters. One march organizer, Antonio Ledezma, claimed that in contrast to the Chavista march, the group came mostly from Caracas and was not paid. He vowed the protests would continue until RCTV returned to the air. Fellow organizer Oscar Perez announced another demonstration June 7, and said the group would also accompany Globovision president Alberto Federico Ravell and talk show host Leopoldo Castillo when they testify at the Attorney General's office June 6 and 7 (Ref B).

18. (SBU) In addition to participating in the opposition march, students held two other events on their own. In one event, a group gathered on the Cota Mil highway that borders the Avila mountain where they formed a human chain to spell out the word "Liberty." A small group also visited the headquarters of private broadcaster Venevision to protest the station's self-censorship in covering last week's pro-RCTV protests. In several press interviews over the weekend, student leaders continued to assert that they are not seeking the government's overthrow and that they are not working in concert with or as proxies for the traditional opposition political parties.

Inter-American Commission to Weigh in Again?

19. (SBU) Local daily El Nacional reports that the Inter-American Human Rights Commission (IACHR) may soon consider a petition for temporary protection filed by a group of students protesters arrested during the week of May 27. According to the article, the BRV has until June 4 to respond to the IACHR's request for information on the detainees. According to Ombudsman German Mundarain, and Supreme Court Justice Eladio Aponte Aponte, who earlier this year "temporarily" assumed control of the Caracas penal court system, only students caught committing violent acts during the previous RCTV marches remain in custody. The rest have either been released or will be pending the posting of bail.

Comment

110. (C) It remains unclear how long students can sustain their demonstrations against the BRV shutdown of RCTV. Contrary to the BRV's heavy-handed efforts to disperse demonstrators last week with tear gas and plastic pellets, the BRV appears to be trying to avoid confrontations, at least during the immediate run-up and during the OAS General

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Assembly in Panama. Demonstration leaders and local and police officials now appear to be working in concert to avoid street clashes, and recent protests have occurred without violence or arrests. President Chavez has virtually conceded the unpopularity of his decision to close RCTV and instead continues to try to reframe the RCTV issue as an opposition effort to topple him. The BRV's Orwellian assertion that freedom of expression now "pertains to everyone" does not appear to be resonating politically. By virtue of the vast government resources at their disposal, Chavez and his supporters managed to mobilize a significant show of support on June 2, but even the so-called "anti-imperialist" march paled in comparison with other recent pro-Chavez rallies in Caracas.

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